DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 079 CS 505 470

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TITLE Rhetoric and Private Address: Christian Values and the Rhetorical Sensitivity Approach to Interpersonal Communication.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (72nd, Chicago, IL, November 13-16, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Altruism; *Audience Analysis; *Biblical Literature; *Christianity; Ethics; *Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; Philosophy; *Rhetoric; Rhetorical Criticism; Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Rhetorical Sensitivity; Rhetorical Theory

ABSTRACT

In light of rhetorical approaches to interpersonal communication, this paper compares the ethics behind the "rhetorical sensitivity" concept of Roderick Hart and Don Burks and the ethics of Christian communication. Outlined are Hart and Burks' exposition of the characteristics of the rhetorically sensitive person which are then compared to the characteristics of Jesus and Paul as they are presented in the Bible. The main characteristic of rhetorical sensitivity, as it differs from Christian interpersonal values, is then described: the interpersonal rhetor analyzes the situation and selects from his/her repertoire of behaviors those that promise to be maximally adaptive. The paper argues that Hart and Burks would find the Christian perspective too restrictive for optimally effective rhetorical interaction and would allow internal inconsistency in rhetorical discourse in order to achieve desired ends. In comparison, the paper argues that while the Christian ethical system easily accommodates the notion of rhetorical adaptation, it is a deontological, rather than a teleological, approach that explicitly limits both means and ends. Finally, the paper describes the rules-based ethic of Christianity as driven by a concern for the Other, thus clarifying its essential distinction from Hart and Burks' situation ethic, which is driven by a concern for the complexity of the Other. (SRT)

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Rhetoric and Private Address: Christian Values and the Rhetorical Sensitivity Approach to Interpersonal Communication

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72nd Annual Convention
Palmer House Hotel
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November 13-16, 1986

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Rhetoric and Private Address: Christian Values and the Rhetorical Sensitivity Approach to Interpersonal Communication

Within the last fifteen years several scholars have sought to enrich the concept of effective interpersonal communication by approaching it from a rhetorical perspective, a perspective that highlights the pragmatic-instrumental-strategic dimension in interpersonal transactions. Despite the paradoxical nature of efforts to apply rhetorical theory, with its traditional focus on public, even mass, communication, to private address, such efforts seem to be flourishing both in number and heuristic value.[1] The purpose of this paper, however, is not to assess the theoretical or pragmatic status of rhetorical approaches to interpersonal communication. My purpose is, rather, to compare the axiology of one of the more infuential of these approaches, the "rhetorical sensitivity" concept of Roderick Hart and Don Burks, with that of Christianity.

In response to the constraints of time and space, I have chosen to limit my attention to the "rhetorical sensitivity" formulation as originally expressed in Hart and Burks' 1972 article, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction,"[2] and as elaborated in a 1980 article by Hart, Carlson, and Eadie entitled "Attitudes Toward Communication and the Assessment of Rhetorical Sensitivity."[3] Focus on rhetorical sensitivity is justified on the ground that it has become a widely-referenced construct that apparently has wielded significant heuristic influence. Phillips and Metzger, for instance, clearly profited from the notion of rhetorical sensitivity in the development of their own rhetorical approach to intimate communication.[4] Darnell and Brockriede argue in Persons Communicating that the rhetorical sensitivity concept suggests a continuum of interpersonal styles which locates Noble Selves at one pole, Sensitive Communicators in the center, and Rhetorical Reflectors at the other pole.[5] Hart, Carlson, and Eadie, in turn, integrated Darnell and Brockriede's continuum into their 1980 explication of the development of RHETSEN, an instrument

for measuring rhetorical sensitivity.[6] Ward, Blumen, and Daurio maintain in a 1982 article that the rhetorical sensitivity construct usefully extends traditional rhetorical theory.[7]

An effort to determine the religious values implicit in any body of discourse brings to the forefront the problem of identifying a useful taxonomy of such values. One solution would be to derive a taxonomy from empirical studies of values held by self-affirmed religious adherents. Rokeach's classic study, The Nature of Human Values, could inform that approach, but the approach itself seems flawed for my purposes because values affirmed by self-described religious adherents are not necessarily religious values. Rokeach himself points to this anomaly. He notes that "despite the fact that Christianity teaches love and charity, data from the national survey do not support the proposition that Christians place a greater value than non-Christians on being loving or helpful. There is no evidence from the national sample that being loving and helpful are distinctively Christian values."[8]

Another potential solution to the problem of securing a viable taxonomy of values, and the solution that I propose to employ, is to apply the value orientation of the Bible itself. Rather than view Christian values through the filter of a theological interpretation, I propose to permit the New Testament to affirm the primary interpersonal and communication-related values that inform the Christian tradition.

One Self or Many?

At first reading, Hart and Burks' explication of the rhetorical sensitivity construct seems simple and straightforward. It appears to amount to little more than the application of the most basic of rhetorical precepts, namely audience adaptation, to the interpersonal setting. Donald Bryant's pithy definition of effective rhetorical discourse as the adapting of ideas to people and of people to ideas would seem to summarize their basic notion.[9] They elaborate the adaptation principle by positing five characteristics of the rhetorically sensitive person: He or she "(1) tries to

accept role-taking as part of the human condition, (2) attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior, (3) is characteristically willing to undergo the strain of adaptation, (4) seeks to distinguish between all information and information acceptable for communication, and (5) tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways."[10] In their 1980 recapitulation of the rhetorical sensitivity construct, Hart, Carlson, and Eadie identified Erving Goffman's notion of "interaction consciousness" as the "most important aspect" of the concept.[11]

Christian values and ethics relating to communication coincide quite neatly with the general, unelaborated version of rhetorical sensitivity presented above. As George Kennedy has recently emphasized,[12] Christianity is a thoroughly rhetorical religion, which is to claim that it values instrumental, strategic, adaptive communication as a means of achieving its ends. Jesus himself is portrayed in the New Testament as a prime exemplar of rhetorical sensitivity. He was willing to adapt to people and situations by assuming various communicative styles and roles: with Nicodemus, he was the respected Rabbi;[13] at the last supper he dramatized the role of the household servant;[14] with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, he was the loving, intimate friend.[15] And Jesus' verbal behavior was adaptive rather than stylized: he scolded the Pharisees for their hypocrisy,[16] told parables with dry, tongue-in-cheek humor,[17] tested with insults the mettle of a gentile woman who came seeking the healing of her daughter,[18] and dealt in quite different ways with straightforward and loaded questions.[19]

Paul, after Jesus the dominant figure in the New Testament, also serves as an exemplar of rhetorical sensitivity. The classic statement of early Christianity's rhetoricism is Paul's explanation to the Corinthians of his strategic adaptation to potential converts:

> For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law--though not being myself under the law--

> that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law--not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ--that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.[20]

The examples in Paul's letters and sermons of adroit adjustment to diverse audiences complement this remarkable affirmation of willingness to undergo the strain of adaptation.

The apparent congruence of Christian interpersonal values with rhetorical sensitivity begins to diminish as one proceeds to examine the fine print of Hart and Burks' argument. Their first movement posits the complexity and diversity of human nature and urges the acceptance of role-taking "as part of the human condition."[21] Stripped of its irrelevant existentialist ideology, their advice is altogether conventional: effective interpersonal rhetors analyze the situation and select from their repertoire of behaviors those that promise to be maximally adaptive; hence, the larger the repertoire of behaviors with which the rhetor feels comfortable, the greater the potential for appropriate adaptation. Hart and Burks clutter an otherwise simple point with pseudo-complexity, however, by arguing at length the less conventional thesis, most often identified with Kenneth Gergen, that a human being does not possess a "Real Self" but is better thought of as a collection of interconnected selves or roles.[22] Hart and Burks themselves imply that this argument, to which they devote three pages, is both irrelevant and of scant intrinsic consequence: they assert that "even if we assume for the sake of argument that there is a Real Self, this does <u>not</u> imply that there is but one way or a limited number of ways of displaying this Self--that is, making the self rhetorically manifest--in social interaction."[23] Since the "Real Self" position does not militate against their adaptation doctrine, and since it appears to be only semantically different from the

multiple-selves formulation, one might wish that they had granted it, if not for argument's sake, at least in the service of clarity and economy.

It should be noted (despite the risk of compounding the irrelevance) that the New Testament assumes that each human being has a relatively stable self that is identifiable at least to himself and to God. The process of conversion includes a point of crisis at which the individual must decide whether to "repent," that is, whether to commit himself to "put off the old nature" (or self) and put on the new in emulation of Jesus, who embodied and modeled the intrapersonal and interpersonal values that constitute the ideal self.[24] We have previously observed in the rhetorical activities of Jesus and Paul that the Christian perspective on the self allows for a wide diversity of adaptive roles.

Teleology or Deontology?

Hart and Burks, however, would find the Christian perspective not only on the self but particularly on interpersonal values and ethics too restrictive for optimally effective rhetorical interaction. They pursue, in the remainder of their argument, a rationale for giving communicators permission to employ a range of adaptive options nearly unlimited by either theoretical or ethical prescriptions.

Because of the high order of complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictability that they take to be inherent in human interaction, Hart and Burks assert that "rigid, prescriptive formulas for achieving interpersonal success hardly seem appropriate."[25] The adjective "rigid" in this passage is redundant as well as question-begging; they appear to take the position that prescriptions <u>per se</u> are too limiting and rigid in the interpersonal setting. In a key, italicized passage, they assert that "<u>every verbal exchange is a fleeting, ad hoc affair in which the guiding principle is flexible discretion, so buttressed by a concern for the complexity of the Other that no inviolable verbal premise should be brought to bear</u>."[26] Thus the only limitations on rhetorical adaptation that Hart and Burks recognize are the practical

barriers posed by human finitude.[27] Within the unavoidable limits of intelligence, creativity, and will, the rhetor should, they argue, be essentially unrestrained in his strategic pursuit of interpersonal success.

The disdain of Hart and Burks for prescriptions and rules translates into a teleological as opposed to a deontological approach to rhetorical ethics. They explain that "when we recommend . . . a teleological ethic for governing interactive behavior we mean that rhetorical decisions should be made with reference to the consequences of a given course of action rather than to any given formalized principle."[28] Unrestrained by formalized principle, the sensitive rhetor functions within a flattened value system in which there is "no hierarchy of roles," or patterns of adaptive behavior, and in which rhetorical decisions are usually made "on the basis of expediency."[29]

Hart and Burks insist that permission to adapt on the basis of expediency rather than principle should be radical enough to allow the rhetorically sensitive person to violate one of the most powerful norms in Western culture, namely the consistency principle.[30] "If a man hangs his chances for social effect on a limited number of apparently consistent pegs," they warn, "he is unlikely to be capable of coping with the ever-changing exigencies that social interactions usually entail. As a result, the rhetorically sensitive person is always in a state of becoming, of developing and making use of a potentially contradictory verbal repertoire."[31] They do not think of contradictory adaptive behavior as merely potential or rare: the rhetorically sensitive person "understands that his roles or social selves will oftentimes be at odds with one another, and at times, downright contradictory."[32].

Hart and Burks' attack on the consistency norm is unsystematic and inconsistent. Their rhetorical ineffectiveness lies in failure to observe Socrates' dictum to Phaedrus that the key terms of an argument should be clearly defined and the definitions strictly adhered to.[33] The nearest approach that Hart and Burks make to defining "inconsistent behavior" occurs in the following passage:

> In an important sense we are suggesting that one's "rhetorical self" is manifested when he comes to understand that his actual verbal behavior is often inconsistent with what he might have said on impulse and is different from what he might have said to another person in the same situation.[34]

This statement and the whole of their argument against a "consistency-above-all ethic" raises more questions than it answers. What are the distinctions, if any, between adaptive behavior that is "different" from other adaptive behavior, "inconsistent" with other adaptive behavior, and "downright contradictory" to other adaptive behavior? If by "inconsistent" Hart and Burks mean merely "different," as the passage quoted above indicates, they are attacking a straw man. No one, including the most radical deontologist, would posit an ethical rule demanding "utterly consistent" (identical) behavior in similar situations, much less in dissimilar ones. To do so would be to outlaw the whole category of adaptive behavior. It is altogether conventional within rhetorical and ethical systems to permit a person to adapt his behavior to particular circumstances, that is, act differently within a situation as circumstances alter or act differently from one situation to another. To refer to merely <u>different</u> behavior within or across situations as <u>inconsistent</u>, as Hart and Burks seem to do, is not, to say the least, to use language with adequate precision. If I have an impulse to speak to a given point with a conversational partner but quietly decide that the time and place are inappropriate and either remain silent or speak to an alternative topic, my impulse and my manifest behavior are <u>different</u>, but they are not necessarily <u>inconsistent</u> with each other or with me. And if I choose to adapt to a companion's mood in one situation by playing the fool in an effort to cheer him up but adapt to him with some other role in a new situation involving different or even similar exigencies, my adaptations again are different but not necessarily inconsistent with each other or out of character with my Self or selves.

And what do Hart and Burks mean by "downright contradictory" adaptations? Do they meaningfully apply this provocative term to a category of potential adaptations

that they would approve? Apparently they do not. They neither define the term nor give examples of adaptations that could reasonably be so labeled. They use the terms "contradictory behavior" and "inconsistent behavior" interchangeably and contrast both with the straw-man concept of "total consistency."[35] Both terms, then, turn out to be nothing more than synonyms for adaptive behavior.

Thus when Hart and Burks call "for a greater acceptance of rhetorical inconsistency since it can make both a functional and psychological difference in human affairs,"[36] they are appealing merely for an increased sensitivity to the processes of adaptation. When they do come to grips with authentic issues of inconsistency and contradiction, they lapse into a deontological posture and defend the consistency principle. An expediency-based ethic with no inviolable premises lurking in the closets would sanction lying, misrepresentation of the rhetor's beliefs, feelings, or attitudes, and deceptive reasoning processes as needed to cope with situational exigencies. Hart and Burks, however, emphasize that "the rhetorically sensitive person is <u>not</u> a chameleon--one who changes <u>ideas or fundamental conceptions</u> willy-nilly."[37] This characterization assumes the thesis they otherwise attack, that is, that consistency is an <u>a priori</u> good.

They jump their teleological ship again in an effort to protect logical arguments and philosophical positions from the sanction they ostensibly offer to inconsistent verbal strategies. "What we are rejecting," they write, "is consistency for the sake of consistency <u>in rhetorical behavior</u>. We do not mean to imply that a logical argument or philosophical position, such as that advocated here, should be inconsistent."[38] This disclaimer is fascinating for several reasons. (1) It illustrates how an ethic of expediency tends to become an indiscriminate net, to use another maritime metaphor, in which its own makers can become entangled. To make a case for strategic inconsistency is to entail the risk that one's own discourse will be read with a certain wariness. (2) To extricate themselves, Hart and Burks, in a genuinely provocative turn, remove the making of logical arguments and the development of

philosophical positions, including their own, from the realm of rhetorical behavior. Since the crucial dynamic of philosophical argumentation is rigorous internal consistency, their dichotomy amounts to a highly pejorative conception of rhetorical discourse. It is one thing to argue that rhetors may adapt to listeners across situations with different messages but quite another to suggest that rhetors may resort, even if they can locate adequately naive receivers, to inconsistency within a message. (3) Hart and Burks support their truncation of the domain of rhetoric by referring to Chaim Perelman's contrast between logical and rhetorical reasoning.[39] Their use of Perelman, however, is, ironically, inconsistent with Perelman, who emphasizes dialogic audience-centeredness, not the potential for internal or even cross-contextual inconsistency, as the essential feature of rhetorical reasoning. Perelman's dichotomy is between logico-mathematical reasoning, in which men are "intellectual robots" engaged in "mere calculation or . . . the automatic working out of a [computer] program," and rhetorical reasoning, which "presupposes a contact of minds and always occurs in a psychical and social context."[40] Rather than separate rhetorical and philosophical discourse, Perelman binds them together: "the rhetorical dimension," he writes, "is unavoidable in every philosophical argument, in every scientific discussion which is not restricted to mere calculation . . . ."[41] (4) By allowing internal inconsistency in "rhetorical" but not in "philosopical" discourse, Hart and Burks undermine their whole argument in favor of teleological ethics. One wonders why consequenses should not justify means in the discourse of scholars as well as in ordinary interpersonal communication. An inconsistent attack on consistency whose inconsistency resides in part in assuming the value of consistency is a prime example of trying to have one's ethical cake and eat it too.

Another difficulty in Hart and Burks' argument for a teleologic ethic is that they do not formally discuss what sorts of consequences they believe to be preferable or whose welfare should be taken primarily into account. An analysis of their more-or-less casual references to these issues, however, indicates that they are mainly

interested in whether the rhetor achieves his own interpersonal goals, which presumably could be located anywhere on an egoism-altruism continuum. For instance, they believe that rhetorical sensitivity can help us to "facilitate human understanding," "effect social cohesion,""maintain interpersonal relationships," "make the most out of . . . social interactions," "best meet the social conditions we face," "initiate more profitable and healthy rhetorical relationships," "manage successfully complex social interactions," achieve "social effectiveness," "engage in mutually profitable social interaction," and "deal better with the [rhetorical] worlds of others."[42] An explicit rationale for a teleological approach to interpersonal ethics should do more than make casual, ambiguous reference to the nature of acceptable ends. In a consequences-justify-adaptational-strategies line of argument, careful construction of the concept of justificatory consequences would seem to be mandatory.

While the Christian ethical system easily accommodates the notion of rhetorical adaptation, it is a deontological approach that explicitly limits both means and ends. Whereas Hart and Burks' teleological orientation, if pursued consistently, disallows prescriptions regarding motives as well as means, Christian interpersonal ethics are driven by the transcendent ideal of universal good will. By the life of Jesus and by repeated injunction, Christianity prescribes a radical altruism that provides a pervasive psychic context for interpersonal transactions.

So radical is Christian altruism that one is obliged to place the welfare of the Other above his own. Paul argued to the Christians in Rome that since Jesus "did not please himself" but willingly accepted the role of the suffering servant, they who were strong also should "bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please [them]selves."[43] To the Corinthian Christians he urged, "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor."[44] And he told the Philippeans to "do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but to the interests of others."[45]

This radical altruism determines the selection of both means and ends in interpersonal behavior. To achieve such ends as mutual spiritual growth and emotional and pragmatic interdependence,[46] Christians were taught to avoid certain communication behaviors and to prize others. To be avoided were slander and gossip, "evil talk," "filthiness," "silly talk," lying and other forms of deception, quarreling, and "stupid controversies."[47] Sanctioned forms of interaction are characterized by humility, patience, graciousness, helpfulness, control of anger, forgiveness, encouragement, empathy, "perfect courtesy," kindness, expression of gratitude, and truth-telling.[48] Paul and other New Testament authors do not discuss potential exceptions to these injunctions. It does not occur to them that these rules need ever be violated because of unusual situational exigencies or because of latent tensions or contradictions among them. The only hierarchy of goods they recognize involves the transcendence of good will; all of the other prescribed attitudes and behaviors are implied by and subsumed within this one fundamental imperative of human behavior. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments . . . are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."[49]

The essential distinction between Hart and Burks' situation ethic and the rules-based ethic of Christianity is that the former is driven by "concern for the complexity of the Other"[50] but the latter by concern for the Other.

Endnotes

[1]Joe Ayres, "Four Approaches to Interpersonal Communication: Review, Observation, Prognosis," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 48 (Fall 1984), 419-422.

[2]Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," Speech Monographs, 39 (June 1972), 75-91.

[3]Roderick P. Hart, Robert E. Carlson, and William F. Eadie, "Attitudes Toward Communication and the Assessment of Rhetorical Sensitivity," Communication Monographs, 47 (March 1980), 1-22.

[4]Gerald M. Phillips and Nancy J. Metzger, Intimate Communication (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976), pp. 10-13.

[5]Donald K. Darnell and Wayne Brockriede, Persons Communicating (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), pp. 170-190.

[6]Hart, Carlson, and Eadie, pp. 2ff.

[7]Stephen A. Ward, Dale L. Blumen, Arthur F. Dauria, "Rhetorical Sensitivity Recast: Theoretical Assumptions of an Informal Interpersonal Rhetoric," Communication Quarterly, 30 (Summer 1982), 189-195.

[8]Milton Rokeach, The Nature of Human Values (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p. 83.

[9]Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 39 (December 1953), 412.

[10]Hart and Burks, p. 76.

[11]Hart, Carlson, and Eadie, p. 2.

[12]George Kennedy, New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), chap. 7.

[13]John 3:1-21 (All biblical references are to the Revised Standard Version.)

[14]John 13:1-20

[15]John 11:1-36

[16]Matthew 23:1-36

[17]Luke 11:5-13

[18]Matthew 15:21-28

[19]Matthew 19:16-22; 21: 23-27

[20]I Corinthians 9:19-22

[21]Hart and Burks, p. 76.

[22]Hart and Burks, pp. 76-79.

[23]Hart and Burks, pp. 78-79.

[24]Ephesians 4:17-24; Colossians 3:5-9

[25]Hart and Burks, p. 79.

[26]Hart and Burks, p. 82.

[27]Hart and Burks, p. 83.

[28]Hart and Burks, p. 82.

[29]Hart and Burks, p. 79.

[30]Hart and Burks, pp. 79-80.

[31]Hart and Burks, p. 80.

[32]Hart and Burks, p. 79.

[33]Plato's Phaedrus, trans. by R. Hackforth (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, n.d.), 263 A-E, pp. 126-127.

[34]Hart and Burks, p. 81.

[35]Hart and Burks, pp. 79-81.

[36]Hart and Burks, p. 81.

[37]Hart and Burks, p. 89.

[38]Hart and Burks, p. 81.

[39]Hart and Burks, pp. 81-82.

[40]Chaim Perelman, "The New Rhetoric," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. by Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 119.

[41]Perelman, p. 119.

[42]Hart and Burks, passim.

[43]Romans 15:1-2

[44]I Corinthians 10:24

[45]Philippeans 2:3-4

[46]Romans 12:4; I Corinthians 12:12-26; Colossians 2:2

[47]Ephesians 4:29-31; 5:1-4; Colossians 3:5-9; Titus 3:9

[48]Romans 12:3-15; Ephesians 4:2-3, 25-26,29-31; Ephesians 5:4, 20; Philippeans 2:3-4; Colossians 3:12-15

[49]Romans 13:8-10

[50]Hart and Burks, p. 82.